

# Obsculta

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Volume 4 | Issue 1

Article 11

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5-1-2010

## Jeremiah

Sister Bifen Mary Mao

*College of Saint Benedict/Saint John's University*

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ISSN: 2472-2596 (print)

ISSN: 2472-260X (online)

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### Recommended Citation

Mao, Sister Bifen Mary. 2011. Jeremiah. Obsculta 4, (1) : 37-40. <https://digitalcommons.csbsju.edu/obsculta/vol4/iss1/11>.

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Sister Mary is a religious sister of the Saver of Souls order from Ningbo, China. In pursuit of a pastoral ministry degree, she studied the prophet Jeremiah and recognized in him, a role model for her future work in China. Sister Mary describes a vision of the Holy Spirit visiting thirteen million Chinese in order to bring about conversion, and she would like to work in support of those who choose to renew their relationship with God.

Jeremiah portrays God with active and powerful images: a diligent gardener who roots up and plants, an architect who destroys and builds (Jer 1:10), a parent who intervenes in His people's daily life, a loyal husband who focuses on His relationship with His wife. God used this positive way to communicate with His people but sometimes had to use judgment in order to urge His people forward. Three aspects of Jeremiah's message that his audience found difficult to accept were: (1) his warnings of the doom of Jerusalem, (2) his opposition to the false religion of Israel, (3) his declaration that God had rejected a petition of His people. Jeremiah pictures God as one who loves to dialogue with His people, to discipline His children, to help His people shoulder their yoke, and to build a righteous kingdom.

During the time of Jeremiah's ministry, Judah was controlled by Assyria until 612 B.C. Then after 605 B.C, Judah and all nations had to offer tribute to the Babylonian king. When Manasseh (687-642 B.C.) was the king of Judah, he led his people to set up idols inside the temple and worship them and to sacrifice their own children to Baal. Josiah (640-609), who was the king of Judah after Manasseh, tried to reform the land, but his people did not convert. Even his son Jehoiakim (609-598), the king after him, chose to do evil, which led to the fall of Judah. Therefore, Yahweh was in agony because He could not find one person who lived uprightly and sought to be faithful in Judah (Jer 5:1).

Jeremiah was the most significant figure in Judah and Jerusalem who shared God's plan for Judah during this chaotic period. He was born of a priestly family in Anathoth and was called to be God's prophet when he was young. His mission in Judah was to root up and to tear down, to destroy and to demolish, to build and to plant (1:10). To perform the will of God entirely, he renounced marriage and a household (16:1-4). Thus, he lived only for God. Although he was distinguished from the people to convey God's voice, his spirit was closely related to his fellow Judahites. He commiserated with his compatriots and sympathized with their sufferings.

His own life symbolized the suffering proclaimed in God's prophecy of judgment. To do so, he became like a pillar of iron and a wall of brass and thus came to symbolize hope during the time of tribulation (1:18).

The first aspect of Jeremiah's message of doom to be examined is that God would ruin Judah and Jerusalem completely if Judah continued their injustice, relying on other national powers, and resisting the yoke of Babylon. Before God used punishment, He used warnings to promote His people's conversion. However, at that time, the false prophets also rose up. They announced messages of peace, claiming that Jerusalem and Judah would never be destroyed. As a result, Israel accepted this false peace and lived under self-deception. By contrast, Jeremiah not only challenged his people, but he also condemned the political leaders of Judah and the priests. He used the image of a potter's flask to declare that God had no choice but to act harshly (19:1-13). God would smash his city and his people, with no possibility of repair. People would die without burial (19:11).

This grievous message about the coming disaster of Jerusalem pricked the heart of Judah because they believed that they were God's people and would be protected at all times. It also was a serious humiliation for them to die without a burial place. In accord with the Chinese proverb, "good advice is harsh to the ear," the people of Jerusalem preferred false information to keep an illusive peace in their heart, even though Jeremiah's warning was an opportunity for the people to convert. Eventually, they hated Jeremiah! The priest Pashhur, who was the chief officer in the house of the Lord, scourged Jeremiah and placed him in stocks.

Jeremiah lived on the edge of violence: his own relatives betrayed him, and his parents also abandoned him. He became an object of laughter, and everyone mocked him (20: 7). At that critical time, Jeremiah never stopped conveying God's prophecy. He cried out to God and confided his inner distress to God. When he communicated with God, he realized that God was with him like a mighty champion. As a result, he believed that his

persecutors would stumble (20:11). He could not escape his responsibility to preach because it became like fire burning in his heart (20:9).

One of the images of God in Jeremiah's preaching is that of a powerful friend. Through His interactive relationship with Jeremiah, God conveyed his will to Jeremiah and shared Jeremiah's suffering. He was a bosom friend who listened to Jeremiah's inner voice and cared for his suffering. Because God shared Jeremiah's negative emotions, He gave more confidence to Jeremiah. God also was a companion in time of misfortune. Just as Jesus suffered for God's people, so also God supported his friend Jeremiah by experiencing many tribulations. Jeremiah's suffering experience would be an example to Israel, which could help them pass through the future exile. Sharing their weakness, Jeremiah accompanied them as they turned to God.

Another image of God in first part of Jeremiah's ministry is that of a disciplinarian of His people. God has own plan for His people's future. Sometimes the living God might allow His people to experience suffering to purify their hearts. From Jeremiah's perspective, suffering is a way to grow since it has a therapeutic effect. Like Chinese foot reflexology, the ache is the sign of healing. Surely people cannot escape from suffering in their life, but they can choose how to cope with it. The crucial point in Jeremiah's life was to live with confidence in God. God knows to whom he will bring suffering and also understands the significance of this suffering. Jeremiah set an example for his people that he could stand firm in persecution and could persevere in truth because he was hopeful.

Hope is the light in the darkness that helps people overcome their sufferings. In our human condition, it is impossible to avoid the unexpected challenge or disaster, but we can change our attitudes. We should learn from Jeremiah, who trusts in God, that he is like a tree planted beside the waters that stretches out its roots to the stream (17:8). Jeremiah, who is like this tree, does not fear spiritual aridity, but encourages others to endure their difficulties. By contrast, people who rely on humans, like the lowly in the desert, have no strength to face their disasters because they are rooted in saline land (17:6). In this passage, the stream is our relationship with God, and we should root ourselves in this relationship. The saline land is our idolatry, which may be our achievements, position, power, reputation, addictions, and possessions that deprive us of nutrition.

According to Jeremiah's experience, I have also discovered that God takes the initiative in our individual and collective histories. Jeremiah is the object of clay whose mind is shaped by God (18:4). God knows His prophet before he was born, chooses this prophet to speak on behalf of Him, and puts His words in his mouth. Jeremiah did not run away from this dangerous situation, but submissively undertook his mission, cooperating with God because he understood that God had appointed him from the womb.

The voice of Jeremiah also appears in modern society. God chose me as he chose Jeremiah, and I should be respond to God's voice. I always should tell the truth bravely to the authorities in my church and society, although this may irritate them. Sometimes I avoid telling the truth to an authority because I understand that I will be hurt if I do. However, the spirit of Jeremiah stirs my will that I should not run away from this duty. Otherwise I would be a peace prophet. I should learn from Jeremiah to share in suffering for God and His people, for I believe that God will be my strength.

A second aspect of Jeremiah's message to be examined focuses upon arguing against false worship based on the people's trust in the Temple and not in God himself. The Temple in Jerusalem was the symbol of the presence of God to the Israelites. The people of Jerusalem trusted in the protective power of the Ark in the Temple and regard it as a talisman. Because God was regarded as living in the temple, they believed no one could destroy it. Their belief in the protective power of the temple was strengthened more when they realized that the temple stood even after Assyria ruined Judah in 701 B.C.

Israel concentrated on their traditions of worshiping but forgot that God was one whom they should worship. They were enthusiastic for sacrifice in the Temple—even child sacrifice—but their behavior went contrary to the commands of God. They oppressed the resident alien, the orphan, and the widow; they shed innocent blood, worshiped Baal, and made cakes for the queen of heaven (7:6, 18). They even went to worship after they did these immoral behaviors—an external religious action that gave them an illusive sense of security. Jeremiah spoke on behalf of God that the people should reform their ways and their deeds by acting justly toward their neighbors, because God loves their conversion more than sacrifice. Otherwise, they will no longer be able to live in this

holy land, and the Temple will be destroyed if they do not change their ways (7:5).

Jeremiah addressed this distinct message to them that the Temple would fall if they continued to follow their own course but also pointed out how they could live a happy life. However, the people found this message tough to accept as they were living in darkness. Properly speaking, the temple was a place that people could worship God, a room for building their relationship with God. But they had the superstitious attitude to trust in the temple itself and forgot that Temple is only a symbol which points to the higher power of God and is not God Himself. The religious ceremony was a way to express the people's relationship with God, but the ceremony itself was useless to God.

The Israelites repudiated Jeremiah's warning because their faith conflicted with their daily life. Their ceremonial offerings, not their relationship with God, were their source of assurance. They believed that they were God's children and no one could destroy them. It is obvious that Jeremiah's preaching attacked their ultimate foundation of life. If they stopped offering, they could hold nothing as their lifeline; thus they would be in turmoil. As a result, the people rejected Jeremiah's advice and treated him as a crazy youth.

They were also reluctant to admit their wrongdoings and thus be forced to give up the benefits they received from them. If they changed their behavior, they might lose their wealth and become familiar with the idea of self-sacrifice, not just animal sacrifice. For any one person to adjust his or her behavior in the right direction, he or she might be ridiculed, as was Jeremiah who was opposed to the majority and even to the authorities. Therefore, the people let his message go in one ear and out the other.

It is clear that Jeremiah shows that God loves us in order to build our relationship with him, not just to establish the practice of worshiping Him. He directed His people on the way to life and had untiringly sent all his servants, the prophets, to his people (7:25). God disliked that his people's faith was inconsistent with their behavior but expected them to obey his commands (7:23). In addition, Jeremiah pictured God as a responsible parent who cared about his children's life. He knew that His people would die if they insisted on their false way of life, like fish without water. It was the time to use the stick to change their direction. For God, destroying is part of rebuilding (1:10). However, his people

neither listened to his words, nor negotiated with him, but continued on their own way (7: 13).

Human beings have a common weakness in that they tend to trust in God only when they are on the edge of a cliff. They use diverse methods to avoid disasters, such as worshiping different idols and relying on the strongest political power. Maybe God looks like the "third" choice in terms of a hospital for the patient. The first hospital is powerful people who can be relied on for science and technology, and the second is local or foreign gods. The people turn away from God until they are driven from pillar to post. Faith is the "relationship with" God and not a business transaction. They should build a relationship with Him and obey His commands, which is more difficult than mechanically worshiping the divine.

The message of Jeremiah also challenges me when I regard my life of ministry as my security and thus concentrate more and move on my work. Actually, I should work with Jesus and live in him. I should be aware of the desires of Jesus, because God is a conversational Lord, who is interested in an interactive relationship and not just in my working for him. When I am quick to walk alone in front of Christ, he has enough patience to wait and keep silence until the right time. I should always give room to him and open my heart to talk with him unreservedly. For me, Jeremiah is an excellent example of someone who is open minded.

A third aspect of Jeremiah's message that his audience found difficult to accept is that God rejected the people's plea for rain. When a serious drought came, no one could escape this natural disaster, no matter how high the position he or she held. It included everybody from the aristocracy in the city—who have money and power and leisure but could not find even a bucket of water to drink—to the farmers scratching out a living in the dry fields, and down to the animals who were driven to unnatural acts such as the doe who abandoned her fawn to starvation because she could not find any grass.<sup>1</sup> During hard times, people realized that the drought was linked with their terrible behavior, which was God's stick for them, and so they felt guilty about their disloyalty.

On this edge of a cliff, the people asked Jeremiah twice to entreat God to rescue them from the drought and thus to move God to honor his covenant with

<sup>1</sup> Lawrence Boadt, *Jeremiah 1–25* (Wilmington, Del.: Michael Glazier, 1982) 111.

Israel, because they had already confessed their treachery. However, Jeremiah responded that God would not listen to their supplication and would destroy them with the sword, famine, and pestilence even if they offered more sacrifices (14:12). Nevertheless, God could not help weeping for His virgin daughter and the people suffering within her. Unfortunately, Jeremiah's audience refused his message, and he became a man of strife and contention to all of the land (15:10).

What special image of God did Jeremiah show us through this message? The image of compassionate God is visible because God weeps for His people's suffering. God is not indifferent, but sympathetic. Nevertheless, why did God still punish His people if He were really compassionate? On a deeper level, God held the balance between mercy and justice. In other words, good parents should discipline their children, if they care about their children's growth, instead of spoiling them. God was familiar with the nature of His children, He noticed that His people felt guilty but without altering their behavior. They beseeched Him but focused on their own needs, not their relationship with God. It is obvious that this righteous God hoped His people not only would feel guilty but also would make up for their faults and be converted. In other words, God loved people who changed their hearts instead of merely their minds, emotions, and actions. Conversely, if a vicious people could obtain God's grace, only because they feel guilty, it would seem unfair to the victims. But since God's justice is universal and balanced, His people should carry out justice for others.

Another reason why God refused the people's petitions was that they broke their covenant with God and so God had to punish the people. God had to show two faces. One was that Yahweh was merciful and gracious, slow to anger and rich in kindness and fidelity, continuing his kindness for a thousand generations; the other face was one of strictness so that His people should be loyal to him in order to avoid punishment (Exodus 34:6-7). The covenant was a two-way street. God kept His promise, but His people did not. God who was a loyal husband waited for his wife to convert for a long time—not only this current generation, but also their ancestors—but they did not convert. Therefore, God planned to make a new covenant with them in which He would write the law on their hearts, not on tablets of stone. By carving it on their heart, God would build a new relationship.

God would not only punish His people, but would also punish false prophets. God cared how people publicly influenced their culture. The false prophets, who did not respect Jeremiah and sometimes uttered Baal's words, used God's name to give false predictions that Israel would not see the sword, that famine would not befall them, and that they would have a place (Jeremiah 14: 13). This perspective of lasting peace was not true, but these prophets used God's name to proclaim it to confuse the people; this view of false peace would not benefit God's people, but would lead them to escape reality; this false persuasion would keep the people away from God and allow them to concentrate on seizing the day. We can infer that God was acquainted with His people's character and knew His people were easily influenced by untruth.

God punished false prophets, which shows us that we should be responsible for the way we use power. God will also evaluate us on how we affect our neighbors, our communities, and our society and culture through our words, actions, and lifestyles. We should be responsible for our influence. In general, Chinese culture is a significant influence on our lives, just as the foundation stone is to the skyscraper. Since the basic perspective of Chinese culture is godless, I notice a spiritual thirst in my society. I believe I should follow Jeremiah in dialoguing with our culture, building a bridge from people to God, planting the seeds of hope, and accompanying people who are passing through tough times.

Jeremiah was an innovator who was full of God's spirit. He preached about thinking and doing things differently. Jeremiah encouraged Israel to make the best of their new situation. He fulfilled God's will by dialoguing with common people, political leaders and priests, and by making God's voice known in a chaotic society. His voice was like thunder to the people, who refused it at first. However, its persistent echo resounded back to them so that they might understand it later. He destroyed idolatry and the traditions of false worship. He destroyed an immoral society in order to build a righteous kingdom. It is obvious that modern society also needs Jeremiah, because secularism and materialism are universal. Abortion is legal in China; immorality spreads throughout the world. God is still seeking the person who can speak His voice to our society like Jeremiah. We should respond to God's invitation, to be the salt of the society, to purify the dregs of our culture, and to be the light of the world that shines before others (Matthew 5:13-16).